

# For many, massage is more than a luxury

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Lynn Martin is a Sebastopol farmer who had scoliosis as a kid and can't afford to have her body break down. To keep moving, she depends on regular massage. But hers is no pampering, blissful rub-down. She goes to an orthopedic massage therapist who works with her on specific back issues.

"If I want to relax, I'll go to a spa. This is body work," said Martin, who credits massage with giving her "movement in a part of my back that I cannot remember having movement in before."

No longer considered just a luxury pampering for the rich or a wink-wink euphemism for something sexier, massage or body work has become a popular, legitimate health regimen in the way of herbal medicine, homeopathy and acupuncture.

Santa Rosa writer and teacher Ianthe Brautigan started getting special oncology massage to prepare for surgery for ovarian cancer in 2008.

"I had a tumor larger than a grapefruit and I had this idea that if I did massage before surgery it would relax the muscles and make it easier to extract the tumor," she said.

Her massage therapist, she said, not only worked on her body. "She also gave me a visualization to hold onto and so my surgery went extremely well."

Brautigan goes to Susan Kirk, a nurse who went to massage school while working on the oncology floor at Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital.

"When I went to school, in 1996, massage for people with cancer was just starting," said Kirk. "Until that time it was discouraged because it was believed to spread cancer cells." That notion has been debunked, she said, by studies including the 1999 book, "Medicine Hands," by Gayle MacDonald, who is considered a pioneer in oncology massage.

Now, said Kirk, "it is common belief that it does not (spread cancer) and actually may help to fight cancer cells and metastasis." Many of her clients are referred by nurses, cancer centers and cancer support groups.

Kirk runs Village Therapeutics in Santa Rosa and also teaches both medical and oncology massage. She said that for people dealing with cancer, massage can do many things, including boost the immune system, reduce stress, increase circulation "and make one feel whole again."

Brautigan continued to get massage during and after her cancer treatments and said, "When you enter the medical culture, there is so much intrusiveness. Needles are an everyday part of your life."

But lying on a table under skilled hands was the opposite.

"To be touched by a health professional and have it not hurt, just that alone is so important," she said.

Shelley Rae Doeden, an orthopedic massage therapist in Sebastopol, said many of her clients use massage as a compliment to physical therapy and chiropractic work. The majority of people she sees have standard orthopedic issues, including scoliosis, like Martin, and other neck, hip and spinal issues. They're seeking everything from pain relief to strengthening weak muscles.

She works with people who have athletic injuries as well as those who suffer what she calls “computer syndrome,” which includes chronic tightness in the shoulders and upper back.

“Sitting at a computer, you've got your head forward, which throws your back and posture off. Everything has to work extra hard to hold this big weight up.”

Doeden got interested in massage first as a client when her work as a graphic designer led to wrist problems caused by repetitive stress injury.

She started out doing standard spa massage and then trained in the Hendrickson method of therapeutic and orthopedic massage. One aspect of that method is to use a mild rocking motion on the body meant to stimulate the para-sympathetic nervous system — “the part that tells you to calm down,” said Doeden.

She said in therapeutic massage, the recipient is generally more actively involved than in the classic lie-down and drift-off massage. She says massage as a therapy appeals to boomers who have a tendency to “be proactive about their health and open to alternative methods.”

Martin, at age 53, said, “I don't want to be the crippled-up old lady who at 75 didn't take care of herself and can't move and is three inches shorter than I used to be.”

Retired nurse Barbara Shatto went for massage therapy while preparing for hip surgery. “I figured if I was in as good physical shape as I can be, I would recuperate much easier.”

It paid off, said Shatto, who boasts, “I went home in 24 hours after surgery. Within 10 days I was driving my car.”

Shatto, age 67, said she's “a firm believer in doing as much for myself as I possibly can,” which also includes going to the YMCA daily and doing pilates and tai chi.

Exercise plus massage is the combination that keeps her upright and active, despite having two artificial hips, a bone fracture that never healed properly and 10 years ago “feeling miserable, bent forward and walking with a cane.”

Massage also helps her be more in tune with her body.

“As a nurse, you rush around for 8 hours. You don't even know when your shoulders are up and your neck is tense,” she said. “It took me a long time to be aware of my body's signs and symptoms.”

Beverly Hamilton has knee problems worsened by arthritis, which caused her to start limping. She knew she needed physical therapy but first she had to get her body ready, which led her to massage.

“When you limp, it impacts all your muscles and affects your whole body,” she said. “You know that saying about the knee bone's connected to the neck bone? It's true. Relaxing and balancing those muscles was an essential step in progressing to physical therapy.”

The retired child therapist said with her muscles coaxed back into balance, “I could practice walking to get a feeling of what is normal again.”

Brautigan said before she began getting a massage she checked with her oncologist and surgeon, who gave her the go-ahead. “I knew for myself that western therapy was extremely important and chemotherapy would be my friend,” she said. “But I knew I also needed something else.”

Before cancer she had the occasional massage, “like most women, once a year or so, maybe for a Mother's Day gift.”

Now, as she gets back into “living a normal life,” she considers massage “a basic part of what I do to take care of myself.”

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